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**THE SYRACUSE CAMPAIGN:  
FAILED OPPORTUNITIES, FAILED LEADERSHIP**

BY

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THE SYRACUSE CAMPAIGN: FAILED OPPORTUNITIES, FAILED LEADERSHIP

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## ABSTRACT

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This campaign analysis examines the role of strategic leadership in the failure of the Athenians during the Peloponnesian War. The development of a successful strategy relies on a clear understanding of the objectives and includes an accurate assessment of one's resources and weaknesses and those of one's enemies. Ultimately, strategy must aspire to employ one's strength against an opponent's weaknesses, make use of the experiences of the past, and adjust to the changes of the prevailing conditions, both materially and psychological. Those involved in making strategy, be they statesman or military leaders, live in a world of incomplete information. They do not know how an adversary will act or react, nor do they understand completely the numerous factors that will affect one's strategic performance. To secure the desired strategic result from the strategy chosen requires leadership. Leadership is the common thread that binds a nation, its resources, when it chooses war as its course of action.

The Athenian adventure in Sicily is the most notable among many instances of strategic miscalculation, which led to her loss of empire. She possessed the power to negotiate from strength and shape the environment to her advantage. However, she chose a course of imperialistic conquest that in the end led to the destruction of her military forces.

Athenian defeat can be attributed to a lack of leadership. The cost of this failure was the loss of her empire and the relegation to the dustbin of history.



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## THE SYRACUSE CAMPAIGN: FAILED OPPORTUNITIES, FAILED LEADERSHIP

In this state of affairs what reason can we give to ourselves for holding back, or what excuse can we offer to our allies in Sicily for helping them? They are our confederates, and we are bound to assist them, without objecting that they have not assisted us. We did not take them into alliance to have them help us in Hellas, but that they might so annoy our enemies in Sicily as to prevent them from coming over here and attacking us. It is thus that empire has been won, both by us and by all others who have held it, by a constant readiness to support all, whether barbarians or Hellenes, that invite assistance; since if all were to keep quiet or to pick and choose whom they ought to assist, we should make but few new conquests and should imperil those we have already won. Men do not rest content with parrying the attacks of a superior, but often strike the first blow to prevent the attack being made. Moreover, we cannot fix the exact point at which our empire shall stop; we have reached a position in which we must not be content with retaining what we have but must scheme to it for, if we cease to rule others, we shall be in danger of being ruled ourselves.... Be convinced then that we shall augment our power at home by this adventure abroad, let us make the expedition, and so humble the pride of the Peloponnesians by sailing off to Sicily, and letting them see how little we care for the peace that we are now enjoying.

—Alcibiades (415 B.C.)

The expedition that Alcibiades encourages through his eloquence, which aims to secure the island of Sicily in the fifth century B.C., will taste the fate of failure. None of the survivors, save perhaps a few whose stories are lost to history, found escape from Syracusan captivity. Their resting-place lies in the stone quarries; flesh decaying and returning to the soil, their bones bleaching white in the relentless sun. The expedition by the Athenians and their allies began with promise, but found ruin on the distant shores of Sicily. How did they come to find the end of life and the loss of empire? Were the vital interests of Athens at stake? Was the expedition representative of a proper and effectively crafted strategy, poorly executed? Did a vastly superior force defeat the Athenians or did they suffer the consequences of poor and misdirected leadership?

The development of a successful strategy relies on a clear understanding of the objectives and includes an accurate assessment of one's resources and weaknesses and those of one's enemy. Ultimately, strategy must aspire to employ one's strength against an opponent's weaknesses, make use of the experiences of the past, and adjust to changes in the prevailing conditions, both material and psychological. It considers in advance that first expectations may be frustrated, but has the capacity to make modifications as the changing situation warrants. Those involved in making strategy, be they statesman or military leaders,

live in a world of incomplete information. They do not know how an adversary will act or react, nor do they understand completely the numerous factors that will affect one's strategic performance. To secure the desired strategic result from the chosen strategy requires leadership. Leadership is the common thread that binds a nation, and its resources, when it chooses war as its course of action. It is not enough to have a mature understanding of the strategic landscape, the vital interests of the nation and the resources to achieve objectives in pursuit of the nation's interests. The nation must possess leaders with the ability to influence and persuade the nation and have the judgment to access the situation and then take the appropriate course. The failure of the Athenians during the Syracuse campaign (416-413 B.C.) is attributable to a variety of factors from a failure of arms to the fickleness of fate, but, in the final analysis, it was the result of a collapse of leadership in her most critical hours.

## THE ROAD TO WAR

The fifth century B.C. saw the Greek world engaged in a war that spanned the width and breadth of the Mediterranean. It served as a terrible turning point in Greek History and as the cause of the vast destruction of life and property, but would also spell the doom of the Athenian empire and weaken their collective capacity to resist conquest from those outside the Greek world.<sup>1</sup> When viewed from the perspective of the fifth-century Greeks, the Peloponnesian War seemed as much a world war as any that bear that name.<sup>2</sup>

The basis for our understanding of the Peloponnesian War comes from Thucydides, the son of Olorus, an Athenian who served as a general in 424 B.C. and was condemned and sent into exile for the rest of the war when a city he bore partial responsibility for fell into the hands of the Spartans. His misfortune serves as history's gift in that his exile allowed him to chronicle the war.<sup>3</sup> Thucydides was free to travel widely, obtain the views of the various participants, and thus present a balanced image of the war. The resultant history provides an even-handed and objective history.

Thucydides wrote his history confidently believing that:

"...it would be a great war, and more worthy of relation than any other that had preceded it. This belief was not without its grounds. The preparations of both the combatants were in every department in the last state of perfection; and he could see the rest of the Hellenic race taking sides in the quarrel; those who delayed doing so at once having it in contemplation. Indeed this was the greatest movement yet known in

history, not only for the Hellenes, but of a larger part of the barbarian world - I had almost said of mankind."<sup>4</sup>

History of the classic culture of the Greek world will endorse Thucydides' judgment that the Peloponnesian War was a twenty-seven-year nightmare that wrecked Greece.<sup>5</sup>

Before the fifth century, the Greek world had been isolated from the turbulence of the outside world, free to develop their own forms of governance, customs and traditions. The Greek *poleis* (city-states) most-often formed into broad-based oligarchies that evolved out of landed aristocracies or power inherited from land-based tyrannies. Conflict was local and generally was the result of border disputes. The instrument of Greek warfare lay in the development of heavily armed infantry (*hoplites*) that formed in the phalanx to battle neighboring communities.<sup>6</sup> Their practices and near-ritualistic fighting limited the effectiveness of the military instrument of power and constrain the destructiveness of their frequent wars. However, events of the fifth century changed all that preceded it.

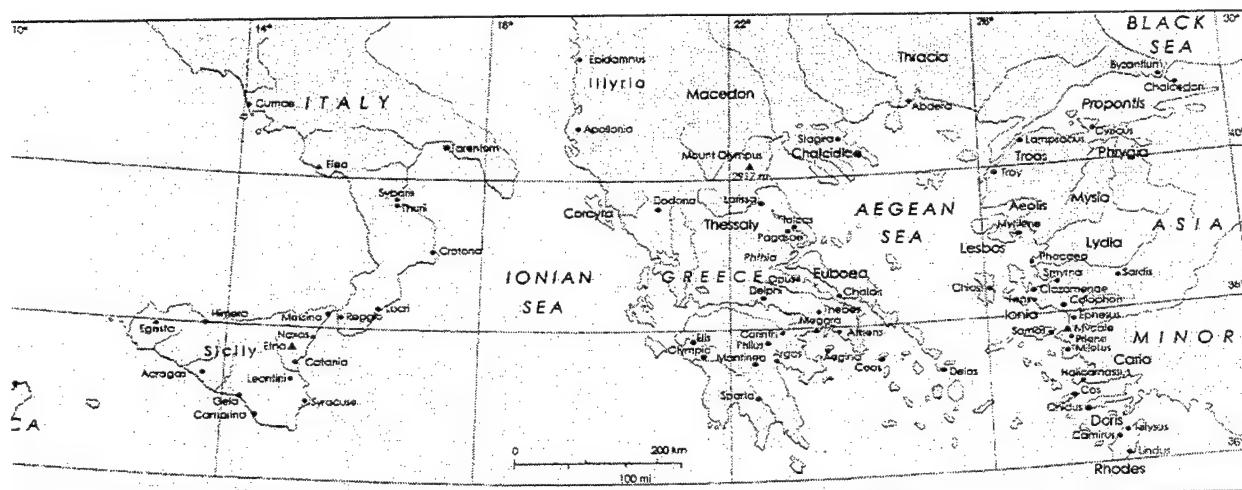
Athens provided the impetus for change. In the last years of the sixth century, Athenian political struggles resulted in the replacement of a rather loose form of despotism with a form of government known as democracy, or the power of the people.<sup>7</sup> This early form of democracy would serve to unify her citizenry, allowing them to seek their own way without the burden of a discontented underclass.<sup>8</sup>

The sovereign in Athens was the assembly, which made all decisions on policy - foreign, domestic, military and civil.<sup>9</sup> It met at least forty times a year in an open-air forum in the center of Athens. All male citizens were eligible to vote, make proposals and debate. This body approved all treaties and voted on the decision to use military force. The assembly approved every detail of each military action. For every campaign, the assembly voted on its objectives, the means to be used and specific instructions to its commanders.<sup>10</sup>

The most important of the offices held by an Athenian were those of the ten generals (*strategoi*). Although they commanded Athenian forces and all that that implied in reference to the requisite military skills, their political skills had to be finely honed as well. They had to secure election each year, which required a political acuity not required by most professional military officers. No fewer than ten times per year, the ten generals faced the assembly, accounted for their actions, and were subject to complaint against their conduct while holding the office. They were subject to trial if accused of misconduct and liable to punishment, at times severe, if convicted. Thucydides was not alone when he felt the wrath of a dissatisfied people after his failure to achieve the measure of success demanded by the assembly.<sup>11</sup>

Inevitably, the development of the Greek world came into conflict with a major power, the Persian Empire. Using their position in the eastern Mediterranean and accessibility to its waterways, the Greeks opened trade, which spanned the area from Spain to the Black Sea. The rising Greek maritime trade routes conflicted with the Oriental land routes and led to the development of a lasting and bitter rivalry. Persia attempted to conquer Greece but met defeat at the hands of the alliance formed by the Greek city-states.

The Greeks fought off three Persian expeditions that penetrated deep into Greece, even capturing and razing Athens. Ultimately, the Persians met defeat at the hands of an enraged Greek populace. What saved Greece was the development of Athenian naval power based on newfound wealth derived from silver mines in Lavrion. The Athenian general, Themistocles, persuaded the Athenians to use the revenues from the newly discovered silver veins for construction of a war fleet rather than distributing the wealth to the citizenry. The Athenians achieved a decisive naval victory at Salamis that resulted in the development of the Delian League, an alliance of maritime powers, which in turn, led to the establishment of the Athenian empire based on her preeminent naval power. The development of the empire forever changed the democracy, as the safety of the state no longer depended on the citizen-farmer who donned the armor of the hoplite, but upon the oarsman of the *triremes*.<sup>12</sup>



## FIGURE 1.

Athenian power and prosperity is shaped and sustained by domination of its maritime empire. The Delian League invited Athens to take the lead in continuing the war of liberation

against the Persian invaders. The league lost its original appearance, gradually falling under Athenian influence and command, and operating for the exclusive benefit of Athens.<sup>13</sup> With the passage of time, most of the members of the Delian League gave up their fleets and were content to pay tribute into the common treasury, controlled by Athens. The smaller states found the financial and access support arrangements with Athens more palatable than training and sustaining fielded forces. The revenues collected increased the numbers of ships and men so that the Athenian navy became the strongest and most capable ever known. The contributions also provided a surplus that went to the Athenian coffers and made available the revenues required to undertake a building program in Athens. The building program glorified the city and gave it the trappings indispensable to an imperial capital.

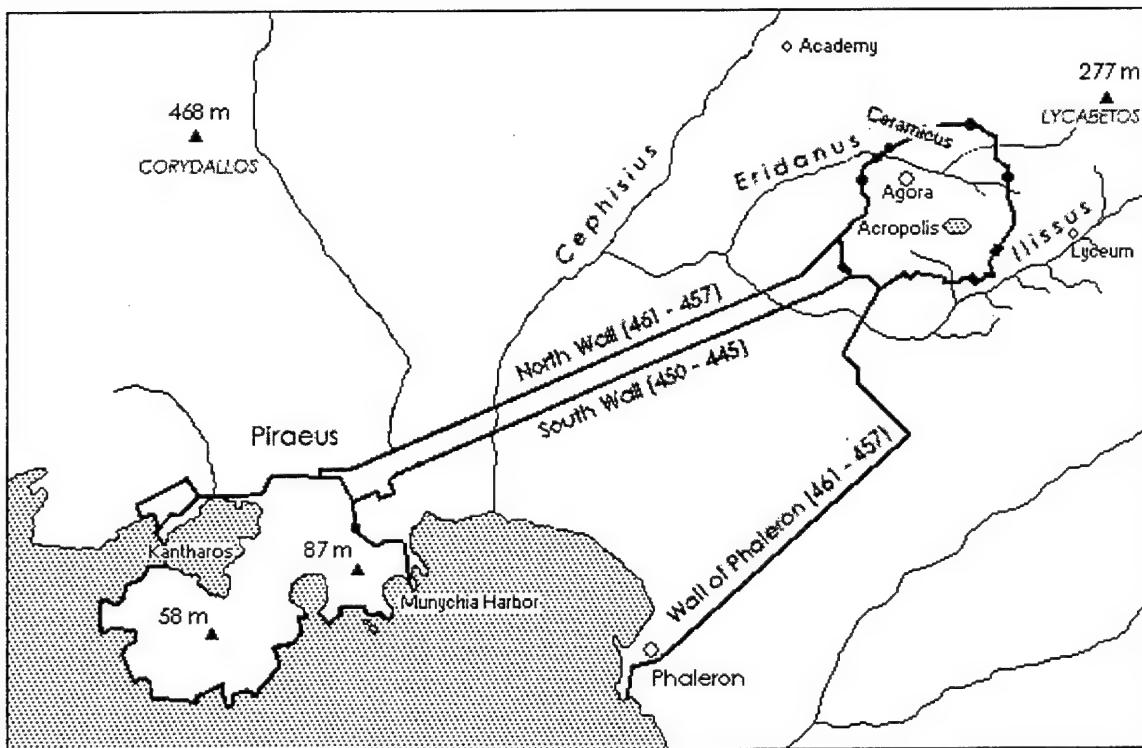


FIGURE 2.

The Peloponnesian League was formed initially as a counter to the threat from the Persians, not as a counter to the Athenians. The city-state of Sparta, a militaristic land-power, provided the leadership of the Peloponnesian League. By the late sixth century B.C., Greece was divided into two distinct power blocs that eventually came into conflict by the early fifth

century. The basic issue was which state would exercise hegemony in Greece. Mid-century battles did not resolve the issue. Despite the expenditure of treasure, their organizations and allies remained intact, but in the end, each side found themselves worn out by the efforts.<sup>14</sup> A truce was negotiated, known as the Thirty Years' Peace, which provided an opportunity for the Greek states to adapt to the new realities. The two great states of Athens and Sparta now led the Greeks. They differed greatly in their character, ideology and in the nature of their power. However, Athens and Sparta had common vital interests. Simply, they had to find a way in which they could live in harmony with each other. Protecting vital interests, though simple enough to recognize, required a collective discipline, that in the event, neither possessed. Both had to limit the desire to expand their influence and hold in check their client states to avoid the unintended entry into lesser wars.<sup>15</sup> If successful, they would have created a Greece of peace and prosperity that could have prevailed against any foreign adversary.

The failure of Sparta and Athens, and their respective alliances, to live in peace and harmony led to the Peloponnesian War. It eventually destroyed the economic well-being, the social fabric, the military power and, finally, the self-confidence of the Greek city-states.<sup>16</sup> Thucydides thought that the war was inevitable. "I think, that the truest cause, but the least spoken of, was the growth of Athenian power, which presented an object of fear to the Spartans and forced them to go to war."<sup>17</sup>

The Athenian constitution made provision for the annual election of ten generals, subject to recall by the assembly. At times, however, a general would garner enough political support and influence as to become the leader of the Athenians. Cimon attained such a stature during the years between 479 and 462 B.C. He led every important expedition and persuaded the Athenians to support his policies at home and abroad.<sup>18</sup> After Cimon's departure, Pericles, son of Xanthippus, achieved similar success over an even longer period. Thucydides describes Pericles as "the leading man in Athens at that time and the ablest in speech and action."<sup>19</sup> For the three decades preceding the war, he was elected to general each year, assisted in the election of associates, to conduct the campaigns he deemed important, and gained the support of the Athenians for his domestic and foreign policies. However, he never had formal powers beyond that of his fellow generals, nor did he ever engage in the alteration of the democratic constitution. He remained subject to the inquiry of the assembly as provided for in the constitution and required that his actions receive a favorable vote before execution. Thucydides described Pericles as the "first citizen" of Athens. The Athenians followed his lead because of his reputation for intelligence, wisdom, ability, honesty, and patriotism.<sup>20</sup> Pericles had remarkable talent as a public speaker and he gained in standing as the result of the success

and popularity of his policies and leadership. With war looming on the horizon, the Athenians invariably turned to Pericles for leadership.

The power and prestige of the Athenian Empire depended upon her command of the seas, centered on the Aegean Sea, the islands in it, and the cities that bordered it. The imperial revenues provided a surplus beyond that needed by the Athenians and the navies of the Delian League. Athens used it for her own purposes, to include a building program that glorified their city and gave work to its people. Additionally, the Athenians amassed a large contingency fund. Their well-funded and equipped navy protected their merchant fleet as they conducted commercial activities throughout the Mediterranean and beyond. They also developed trade with the wheat fields and the fishermen in the Black Sea region. Therefore, they could supplement or replace the meager home food supply if interdicted as the result of war.<sup>21</sup>

## THE PELOPONNESIAN WARS

Between 461 and 445 B.C., with some interruptions, the Athenians fought a war against the Spartans and their Peloponnesian allies that modern scholars call the First Peloponnesian War. During the balance of the war, the Athenians controlled central Greece, including Attica, Thrace and the Isthmus of Corinth. This domination effectively kept Sparta and her allies locked up in the Peloponnesus. While the Athenians held this advantage, the Spartans and their allies, severely hampering their trade and influence in the region. Corinth, the Peloponnesian League's chief naval power, felt the effects most keenly. Rebellions within Athens' land empire led to a change in the military situation by diverting attention and resources from central Greece.<sup>22</sup> Attica found itself open to invasion by Peloponnesian forces that in turn caused Pericles to seek a peace. The peace treaty, known as the Thirty Years Peace, permitted the Athenians to escape a major land battle with Sparta and her allies. The peace was quite satisfactory to Pericles and the Athenians, for it provided for the recognition of the Athenian empire and the division of the Greek world into two spheres of influence. The Spartans, the premier land power, exercised control over the mainland, while Athens continued to control the Aegean. The treaty endeavored to recognize the new realities by providing for "peaceful coexistence" in the form of compulsory arbitration of future disputes.<sup>23</sup> Pericles clearly believed the Thirty Years Peace offered the best hope for the future and met his view of the long-term interests of the Athenian Empire.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the best intentions of the two powers, the great war came. Scholars have called this period of hostilities, the Second Peloponnesian War. As the Spartans and Athenians

feared, the war came not because of a direct military clash, but because of a Corinthian attack in 435 B.C. on the island of Corcyra. The Corcyraeans appealed to the Athenians for assistance against the Corinthians. The Athenians could not simply ignore the threat posed by the Corinthians, for they possessed the only other significant naval power in the Greek world. The terms of the Thirty Years Peace permitted Athens to join the Corcyraeans, but it placed them on the horns of a dilemma. First, if Athens allowed the Corinthian and Corcyraean fleets to combine, they could contest Athenian control of the sea and therefore its security.<sup>25</sup> Second, although Athens had not formally broken the peace, Sparta might find cause to join her Corinthian allies. Both Athens and Sparta, as leaders of the opposing power blocs, understood that strategic miscalculation was apt to lead to a major war, brought about over minor quarrels that did not concern them directly. The uneasy peace that had preceded the onset of open hostilities was characterized, in part, by this fear. The actions of the Corinthians gave a face to the fear.

Pericles did not want war and clearly understood the dangers. He believed that the Spartans would act rationally and prudently by viewing Athenian actions as purely defensive and non-threatening to the prevailing peace. However, he underestimated the Corinthian influence with the Spartans. Corinthian envoys successfully reasoned with the Spartans that Athens was acting as an expansionist power that had designs on absolute domination. According to Thucydides, the Corinthians persuasively claimed that the Athenians desired subjugation of all in her path and intended to "have no other end than slavery pure and simple."<sup>26</sup> They believed that the Athenians represented a permanent danger to security and that the Athenians must meet their defeat at the hands of the combined forces of the Peloponnesians.

The Corinthians proved successful in influencing the Spartans, but not solely on the strength of their arguments, for they received unexpected help from Pericles. He took a number of actions that served to frighten the Peloponnesians and gave encouragement to the anti-Athens faction in Sparta.<sup>27</sup> He supported the proposed alliance with Corcyra and imposed trade embargoes against city-states that supported Corinth. These actions by Pericles gave voice to those who saw Athens as an aggressive hegemonic power, bent on total domination. Pericles rejected all Sparta attempts to mediate the disputes.

Athens did not perceive its actions as threats to the security of Corinth or any other state, but merely as part of an indefinite and in principle limitless strategy of expanding its empire and security arrangements.<sup>28</sup> To the Athenians, their reactions to the threat posed by the Corinthians were prudent and natural given that she must continue to protect her unfettered

access to the Greek colonies in the western Mediterranean in general and in Sicily, in particular. Athens influence and desire to continually expand that influence will serve as a form of tyranny that will not permit her to act otherwise.

Against Pericles' wishes, war came. With the outbreak of war, Pericles developed a strategy that no Greek state had ever attempted - the strategy of exhaustion.<sup>29</sup> In fairness, no state before the emergence of the Athenian imperial democracy ever had the means to attempt it. Pericles' strategy did not aim to defeat the Spartans and the Peloponnesian League in a pitched land-battle, but only to convince them that war with Athens was pointless. His strategic goals relied on assuring a defensive posture on land and a limited offensive stance at sea.<sup>30</sup> In his speech before the Athenian assembly, Pericles outlined his strategy by stating that "[t]hey were to prepare for the war, and to carry in their property from the country. They were not to go out to battle, but come into the city and guard it, and get ready their fleet, in which their real strength lie."<sup>31</sup> He persuaded the Athenians to avoid all major land battles against the numerically and tactically superior enemy, while remaining behind their walled city.<sup>32</sup> Pericles calculated that the Athenians could leave their Attica farmlands undefended and maintain themselves through the importation of sustenance made possible from their control of the seas. He believed they could maintain this posture indefinitely while conducting attacks from the sea. Pericles had good reason to believe that his chosen strategy was the best available and that Athenian resources were adequate to allow it to succeed.<sup>33</sup>

The war began in 431 B.C. with the Athenians at a significant disadvantage in infantrymen; 13,000 men trained and conditioned to fight in a pitched battle, while another 16,000 were available to man the border forts and walls surrounding and connecting Athens and the fortified port of Piraeus.<sup>34</sup> Plutarch's history states that a Peloponnesian army of 60,000 invaded Attica and laid waste to the land as the Athenians sought refuge behind the walls and forts that protected Athens. Pericles believed that once the Spartans saw the willingness of the Athenians to make sacrifices, avoid land battles and adhere to his unique strategy, they would negotiate a peace rather than continue a fruitless enterprise.<sup>35</sup> According to Periclean reckoning, the Spartans would seek an agreement, which in the end, would prove more secure and lasting than the Thirty Years Peace, for it would cause the Spartans to fully recognize Athenian preeminence.

However, an unforeseeable event upset all of Pericles' calculations. In 430-429 B.C. and again in 427-426 B.C., a frightful plague, which had ravaged the East, reached Athens and claimed among its victims Pericles, who died in 429 B.C.<sup>36</sup> Immediately, Athens experienced a vacuum of leadership and a consequent uncertainty in Athenian policy and its attendant

strategy. In 429 B.C. no leader or faction was strong enough to control Athens thoroughly; different groups prevailed on different occasions.<sup>37</sup> For the first time in many years, the Athenians experienced the inconveniences inherent in the truly democratic management of a state in time of war. The destiny of Athens eventually passed into the hands of Cleon, a politician who had been critical of Pericles and a leader of the Athenian "hawks," who made the fatal mistake of converting what in essence was a defensive war into a war of aggression.<sup>38</sup>

Despite the standing enjoyed by Cleon, no figure stood ready to assume Pericles' place. No single individual held the prestige or the influence of Pericles. "Those that followed him," said Thucydides, "were more equal with one another," and so not able to provide the coherent and consistent leadership required in war.<sup>39</sup> Athens had three strategic choices available in 429 B.C.: First, they could adopt a more aggressive strategy, running the inherent risks of applying Athenian weaknesses against Spartan strengths. Second, Athens could seek an immediate peace with the aim of achieving conditions most favorable to Athens. Lastly, the Periclean strategy could be continued, avoid risks, persist with the objective of exhausting the Spartans and negotiate a peace based on the status quo ante bellum.<sup>40</sup> Each of the options had supporters within segments of the Athenian polity. However, the peace faction was discredited by the failed negotiations between Athens and Sparta, which occurred in 430 B.C. The Athenians, in general, were unwilling to accept Spartan terms for peace and, therefore, no leader was willing to associate his name with this policy option. Cleon led the faction that argued for a more aggressive strategy, but his lack of military experience hampered his efforts. More important, the plague still raged and the Athenian treasury depleted, which effected military strength and moral.<sup>41</sup> The most influential factor governing Athenian actions was their culture. Theirs, as it was for most, if not all, Greeks, was a culture that idolized the past heroes. To remain passive certainly ran counter to their ideals of what constituted honor and the proper conduct in war.

As the perception of Athenian strength waned, the confederation of the Delian League began to fray at the edges. According to Thucydides, the democratic leaders in Athens recognized that their free state allies viewed Athens as an empire of force. "You should remember" says Thucydides' Cleon to the assembly in 427 B.C., "that your empire is a despotism exercised over unwilling subjects who are always conspiring against you; they do not obey in return for any kindness which you do them to your own injury, but only in so far as you are their master; they have no love for you, but that they are held down by force."<sup>42</sup> Athenian treatment of their allies, not as co-equal partners, but as vassal states, poisoned their performance and created enemies within their own camp. Many great powers that have

acquired supremacy over other nations have ruled them selfishly and oppressively, but few openly acknowledged their system with the candor displayed by the Athenians. They frankly admitted that the fate of their empire lay with the force they were prepared to use in order to maintain and extend it. Therefore, to be safe, they must be powerful, and to be powerful, they must coerce their allies.<sup>43</sup>

With the beginning of the war, the Peloponnesian League is animated by jealousy and hatred of Athens. When the Spartan-led armies laid waste to the vineyards and fields of Attica, Athens heavy-handed treatment of all served as the impetus for friend and foe alike, to seek courses of action in their self-interest. As the war progressed, Athens increasingly found herself forced to attend to the maintenance of the Delian League.

In 428 B.C. Mytilene, an Athenian client, revolted, and the following year, after a long siege, Plataea fell to the Boeotians. Next, the war was extended to Sicily and an Athenian fleet was dispatched to interrupt trade with the Peloponnese. According to Thucydides, the purpose of the expedition was also "to test the possibility of bringing Sicily into subjection."<sup>44</sup> This provides the first insight into Athenian views of her future role in Sicily. The war continued with highs and lows until 425 B.C. It was in this year that Cleon added to his already considerable prestige by leading an expedition that captured a force of Spartans on the island of Spacteria, located on the west coast of the Peloponnesus.

Cleon's success on Spacteria humbled the Spartans and led them to offer peace and alliance in exchange for the return of the captive Spartiates. Cleon's oratory before the Athenian assembly in 424 B.C. persuaded them to reject the offer and continue the war. He proposed that the Athenians should finance the continuance of the war through exacting tribute from the subject cities in the empire and thus strengthens her position in the Greek world, vis-à-vis, Sparta. In these cities, the Athenian policy included extracting as much money from the subject populace as possible, leading to rebellions that ravaged the Delian League. The Cleon-led Athenians met them with force, further distancing Athens from her allies.<sup>45</sup> Cleon's ruthless edicts met with disfavor among the assembly, who, in response, moved to repel the decrees. However, the damage done to the Athenians was irreversible and brought disfavor to Cleon.<sup>46</sup>

Cleon redeemed his reputation by falling in battle for the city of Amphipolis, against the Spartan hero Brasidas, who was capturing one city after another which were subject to or allied with Athens in the mainland north of Greece. Brasidas died in the same campaign leaving Sparta leaderless in the face of a threatened revolt of her large helot, or slave, population. Sparta offered peace again and, for once, Athens, seeing it in her self-interest, accepted. Athens and Sparta not only declared the war over, but also signed an alliance for fifty years and

Athens committed herself to provide assistance to Sparta should the helots rise in revolt. The Peace of Nicias signed in 421 B.C. failed to achieve a lasting peace or secure Athenian hegemony and the survival of the empire.<sup>47</sup>

## UNSATISFACTORY PEACE

The peace was ill kept by all parties. The futility of the peace should have been apparent from the beginning, for the Spartans never sincerely intended to keep all the provisions. For one, they did not return Amphipolis, which the Athenians deemed essential to the maintenance of the treaty. No Athenian politician, not even Pericles if alive, could have persuaded the polis to accept this state of affairs.<sup>48</sup> Athens failed to meet a provision vitally important to the Spartans, the return of Pylos. Unless these important provisions were honored, the peace could not last.

Although the peace did not achieve its ostensible purpose, events nonetheless vindicated the Spartans in their original decision to make it. The Spartans had been propelled to seek peace by their desire to recover the Spartiates captured at Spacteria and by their fear to continue the war based on their estimate that Athens could add allies from the Peloponnese, namely Argos.<sup>49</sup> The peace allowed the Spartans to obtain the return of their captives and face the threat from the Argives without interference from Athens. Even when the Athenians joined with Argos, their state was so divided and the forces favoring peace so influential, that they made no important contributions to the campaigns that might have threatened Sparta.<sup>50</sup> By the time the peace finally broke down, the Spartans had enjoyed eight years of respite from war and had regained control over the Peloponnese. Therefore, when war resumed in 413 B.C., Sparta was in a far better position than Athens. The Peace of Nicias, though far short of its intended fifty years served Spartan interests well.

The advantages garnered by the Spartans because of the Peace of Nicias, in turn hindered the Athenians. Despite the attractions of peace in 421 B.C., the provisions of the peace were unattainable for the Athenians. Competent statesmanship would have anticipated that the Spartans would not restore Amphipolis or any of the other provisions of the treaty, and it would have realized that the failure to meet the obligations of the treaty would destroy any chance of lasting peace.<sup>51</sup> Through reckless gullibility, perhaps driven by war-wariness, Nicias and the Athenians removed the pressure on the Spartans by restoring the prisoners and fulfilling the terms of the treaty without ensuring compliance.

Nicias pursued a policy of appeasement, which ultimately enhanced the prospects for war.<sup>52</sup> He had the option of assuming a tougher stance relative to the Spartans and their non-compliance. This option preserved the possibility of forcing the Spartans to honor the provisions

of the treaty and return Amphipolis. By facing the realities of the new relationship with Sparta, and making the Spartans face it as well, Nicias might possibly have recovered the initiative and saved the peace. He failed to fully recognize the opportunity to serve the interest of Athens.

Even if Nicias found no way to salvage the peace, he could have championed a policy that recognized that fact and disclosed it to the public. This would have served the greater good of Athens, better than the course that was followed.<sup>53</sup> The truth, if revealed, would have allowed the Athenians to understand that the peace was but fleeting and provided, at best, a breathing spell. This would have permitted the Athenian public to make a more considered judgment on the strategic situation and pursued a policy more in keeping with the facts. If they would have understood, perhaps, they would have chosen to take advantage of the disarray of the Peloponnesian League to obtain allies and strengthen their position. The policy available to the Athenians was to refuse to accept an alliance with the Spartans, and leave Sparta to deal with her own problems, both internal and external. The one course she chose to follow, offered her no advantage and only delayed the inevitable when the deception of the Spartans was finally revealed and a strong and forceful reaction required.<sup>54</sup>

When the Athenians at last discovered the fallacy of Nicias' policy, they chose an extreme course of action, an alliance with Argos. They had no other options - it was too late to return to a policy of cooperation with Sparta. This alliance made peace with Sparta impossible and the likelihood of war great. The Athenians turned from internal matters and sought to find the strategy and policy most likely to bring victory to Athens. Nicias and his compatriots chose half-hearted measures and allowed Sparta to regain the strength of her alliances and when military victories.

Athens missed the last opportunity to avert the continuation of war. Her leaders failed to "seize the moment" and secure for Athens a place among the Greeks city-states that would have retained for her the empire the citizens had come to expect. The Golden Age of Greece was entering the final death throes. Miscalculation, hubris and the absence of the genius for statecraft and war serve as the root causes of failure as the Athenians looked east towards Sicily. In short, there was a collapse of leadership.

## THE DECISION TO SAIL FOR SICILY

Athens' strategic miscalculations led, tragically, to the creation of her own enemies. Not that this was fatal, in and of itself, for she nonetheless maintained the power to extract herself from the morass she produced. Athenian power was exceptional, but was not without limits and, therefore, required prudent application. She could defeat foes as necessary, but most importantly, Athens failed to seek opportunities to co-opt potential foes for strategic advantage. Even having foolishly managed the peace and the empire she possessed, Athens might have achieved her strategic objectives had she not over-extended herself in foolhardy and ill-advised adventurism.<sup>55</sup>

Although hostilities continued in many parts of Greece during the Peace of Nicias, with Athenian territory protected from the ravages of enemies, she had a respite that allowed for the rebuilding of her treasury. So also, as the years passed, was the havoc created by disease and the sword repaired. However, by 415 B.C., Athens was again full of bold and restless spirits who longed for adventure on distant shores where they might distinguish themselves and add to the empire. Most believed that Sparta and her allies had visited the most severe waste on their territory and that this was the worst Sparta had to offer. That Sparta enjoyed the power to continue to do so seemed a strong reason to seek enlargement of Athenian dominion overseas.<sup>56</sup>

The west was now the quarter towards which the thoughts of the Athenians turned. Athens had maintained interest in Sicily from the very beginnings of the war, and her naval squadrons had appeared from time to time on its coast, which allowed her to take part in the discords in which the Sicilian Greeks were universally engaged. Athens' previous involvement in Sicily had ended in 424 B.C. when the Sicilian Greeks agreed among themselves to a kind of Sicilian Monroe Doctrine, rejecting the interference of foreign states in their affairs and, as a result, sending the Athenians back to Attica.<sup>57</sup>

Alcibiades, the ambitious and charismatic nephew and ward of Pericles, emerged as a rival to Nicias and the leader of the faction supportive of a continuation of war. Born in 450 B.C., he was strikingly handsome, and though he possessed outstanding abilities and great wealth, he was vain, reckless and contemptuous of his fellow Greeks. His causes were calculated to earn him increased aggrandizement and the promotion of his own self-interest.<sup>58</sup> When Argos moved ahead in the development of its own alliance that included Mantinea and

Elis, Alcibiades persuaded the Athenians to join three city-states so that this alliance could threaten Sparta's preeminence in the Peloponnesus and thus diminish the Spartan threat to the interests of Athens. Alcibiades viewed the formation of the new alliance as an opportunity to gain a land victory against Sparta with little attendant risk to Athens since the majority of the hoplites would come from their newfound Peloponnesian allies.

Alcibiades, although the nephew of Pericles, proved influential in causing Athens to depart radically from his uncle's strategy. The diplomatic portion of this new strategy - the unification of the three Peloponnesian states against Sparta - proved to be successful. However, in the summer of 418 B.C., the Spartans fought the new alliance at Mantinea absent aid from her Corinthian or Boeotian allies. Ironically, Alcibiades did not take part in the battle due to his failure to achieve re-election in the year his strategy reached its fulfillment. Nicias, and his allies in the assembly, who opposed the plan, assumed the responsibility for its execution.<sup>59</sup> The Athenian contribution to the battle for Mantinea proved half-hearted and significantly less than decisive. The Athenians failed to use their navy for raids that might have diluted the size of the Spartan force at Mantinea. Despite the Athenian reluctance to provide a larger force, the Spartans very nearly lost, this would have most assuredly finished Spartan power and its threat to Athens. A chance for the achievement of an enduring Athenian strategic objective was lost with the battle. The Spartan victory, albeit a narrow one, restored her prestige and led to the reestablishment of her leadership over potentially troublesome allies in the Peloponnesus.

Neither Alcibiades nor Nicias emerged from the adventure with the power to exercise influence over Athenian strategic direction and the ineffective peace. The peace continued while the Athenians sought a new direction. This miscarriage of strategy led to calls for ostracizing Nicias and Alcibiades. As a result, they formed an uneasy alliance that existed until ambassadors from Athens' Sicilian ally, Segesta, arrived in 415 B.C. to plead for Athenian intervention in their war with Selinus. Of greater importance to the Athenians was the suggestion by the envoys of a far larger prize - the frustration of Syracusean expansion in Sicily and the implicit promise of adding to the empire. Armed with assurances that the costs of military assistance would be met by Segesta, the Athenians sent envoys to inspect their treasury, which was found sufficient for their purposes.

The Athenians had no compelling reason to go to Sicily in 415 B.C. They could have chosen to simply ignore the appeals of their distant and small allies. The threat posed by Syracuse to the remainder of the island and the possibility of her gaining hegemony over Sicily, to the benefit of the Peloponnesians, was a future possibility that required no immediate

response.<sup>60</sup> However, the Athenians stated objectives included securing Sicily in order to provide a second source of grain (and excluding it as a source for the Peloponnesians), gain and maintain a foothold in the west and to serve as a foothold for imperial expansion and as a strengthening of her efforts to encircle the Peloponnesians.<sup>61</sup> Others saw the conquest of Sicily as a panacea to Athenian financial woes. The short-lived alliance of Nicias and Alcibiades ended with the consideration by the assembly of the proposed Sicilian expedition.

Nicias opposed the resolution placed before the assembly to embark on the Sicilian expedition. He indicated the imprudence of undertaking a distant campaign by "affirming that you leave many enemies behind you here to go that far away and bring back more with you."<sup>62</sup> He was the lone voice that understood the overextension the resolution portended as he continued by stating: "[W]hile the Sicilians, even if conquered, are too far off and too numerous to be ruled without difficulty. Now it is folly to go against men who could not be kept under even if conquered, while failure would leave us in a very different position from that which we occupied before the enterprise."<sup>63</sup> He proposed that the Athens adopt a more sensible course of action, which if taken, would have proven to be most advantageous to the achievement of their strategic objectives. Nicias believed that the "Hellenes [Sicilian Greeks] in Sicily would fear us most if we never went there at all, and next to this, if after displaying our power we went away again as soon as possible."<sup>64</sup> Nicias ably demonstrated his intuitive understanding of the limits of Athenian power and sought to limit the effects of the emotional power of the assembly as it clamored for an adventure in Sicily. Regrettably for the future of Athens, he did not possess the skills or the desire to persuade the assembly to accept his position.

Alcibiades, being "exceedingly ambitious of a command by which he hoped to reduce Sicily and Carthage, and personally gain in wealth and reputation by the means of his successes,"<sup>65</sup> supported the enterprise and persuaded the assembly through an appeal to their emotions. He said before the gathered Athenians:

"Men do not rest content with parrying the attacks of a superior, but often strike the first blow to prevent the attack being made. Moreover, we cannot fix the exact point at which our empire shall stop; we have reached a position in which we must not be content with retaining what we have but must scheme to extend it for, if we cease to rule others, we shall be in danger of being ruled ourselves.... *Be convinced then that we shall augment our power at home by this adventure abroad, and let us make the expedition, and so humble the pride of the*

*Peloponnesians by sailing off to Sicily, and letting them see how little we care for the peace we are now enjoying. [Italics added]*<sup>66</sup>

Alcibiades' persuasive arguments struck a cord with the Athenians. He now rivaled the popularity and influence of Nicias whom the Athenians had revered as a favorite of the Gods due to his never having lost a battle. Nevertheless, Alcibiades demonstrated his considerable vanity in that he saw an opportunity to surpass the achievements of his uncle and guardian, Pericles. Alcibiades envisioned that the successful conquest of Sicily would lead to his preeminence in Athens and open the door to conquest beyond Sicily to Cartage itself.

The speech of Alcibiades had the intended effect, for it further enflamed the passions of the Athenians. Nicias perceived that it was useless to deter the assembly, so he sought to alter the resolution by exaggerating the size of the expedition required. He believed that this would have a sobering influence on the people. He came forward a second time and reasoned that "[a]gainst a power of this kind it will not do to have a merely weak naval armament, but we shall want also a large land army to sail with us, if we are to do anything worthy of our ambition...."<sup>67</sup> He correctly assessed the challenge that lay before the Athenians by stating that "he who undertakes such an enterprise should be prepared to become master of the country the first day he lands, or failing in this to find everything hostile to him."<sup>68</sup> His intention of preventing the expedition had the opposite effect, for it caused the people to become more eager than ever.

The assembly held that Nicias gave good advice and that the expedition would be safe and free from calamity. As Thucydides tells us: "Everyone fell in love with the enterprise."<sup>69</sup> The assembly voted for everything that Nicias had specified, thus, a small expedition, which held small risk, suddenly became a large campaign with a large force that carried the seeds of the destruction of Athens. Alcibiades received his wish of command, but the assembly, fearing his youth and his impulsive nature, chose the reluctant Nicias as a colleague.<sup>70</sup> Since the disagreements between the two chosen leaders had been played out in public, the Athenian assembly appointed a third general, Lamachus, to break any future ties. Lamachus was a proven leader and had demonstrated a penchant for bold and decisive action. However, he was a lesser public figure who had little or no political support within the assembly. Thus, the die was cast for Athens. She, once again, squandered an opportunity to gain from a pause in the war and to shape the strategic environment to her benefit. Her direction led to an attempt to expand her empire in a high-risk expedition, which, in the final analysis, did not meet her vital interests.

## THE CAMPAIGN

The fated Athenian fleet that sailed in the summer of 415 B.C., was worthy of the state that formed such projects for universal empire. The fleet consisted of 134 galleys and a large number of supply ships and boats. A powerful army of over 5,000 of the best heavily armed infantry Athens and her allies could provide was embarked aboard, along with a number of archers and slingers. Almost 27,000 men, including laborers and workmen, populated the Athenian force. Although they were deficient in cavalry, the expeditionary force was the grandest and costliest Greek force that any city-state had ever sent out.

The Syracusans, at the time of the Peloponnesian War enjoyed a bold and turbulent democracy, and dominated the weaker Greek states in Sicily. They aimed for hegemony over that island with the same supremacy Athens maintained along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean.<sup>71</sup> In numbers, the Syracusans equaled the Athenians but stood inferior in military and naval capability. When the probability of an Athenian-led invasion was first publicly discussed at Syracuse, and efforts were made by some of the wiser citizens to improve their defenses, the rumors of coming danger and the proposals for preparations to meet it were received by the majority of the population with skepticism. Thucydides preserves for us the speech of one of the leading citizens of Syracuse, Hermocrates, who argues that the Athenian expedition "will not be able to do us more harm than we shall do them; nor is the greatness of their armament altogether without advantage to us." On the surface, the words of Hermocrates sound a note of false bravado in the face of the powerful expedition aimed at their city. However, Hermocrates advised that the size and power of the expedition would frighten other Sicilians and induce them to seek alliance with Syracuse. Additionally, he believed that the Athenians had overreached their expeditionary capability, and he stated: "Few indeed have been the large armaments...that have gone so far from home and been successful." Hermocrates believed that the Athenians "rose by [their] defeat of the Persians, in large measure due to accidental causes, from the mere fact that Athens had been the object of his [Persia] attack...."<sup>72</sup> Hermocrates clearly perceived the substantial challenge that awaited the Athenians, that logistical difficulties, coupled with the extreme distances, would certainly exercise an adverse impact on the expedition, and that it might fail, without Syracusan effort, but all to their distinction.

Hermocrates argued that Athens would not likely attack them, but if they did, their defeat was inevitable. He desired to lead an expedition to meet the Athenian force causing confusion and uncertainty, for he knew that the Athenians would have crossed the sea without adequate

provisions and would have a difficult time finding allies. Additionally, and perhaps most important, he knew that “an unexpected circumstance, would break up the expedition, especially as their most experienced general [Nicias] has...taken command against his will, and will grasp at the first excuse offered by any serious demonstration of ours.”<sup>73</sup> Although Hermocrates’ oratory fell largely on unhearing ears, his net assessment of the Athenians proved prophetic.

The Athenian expedition, led by the three generals, met their first unexpected situation at Rhegium, on the toe of Italy. Rhegium was vital to the success of the expedition, for it was a long-standing ally and sited to provide a base from which an attack could be mounted against Messana that allowed the securing of the straits between Sicily and Italy. Alcibiades counted on it to provide an operating base and to influence other Italian cities to join the alliance. However, Nicias’ ruse before the assembly, which led to the formation of the large force, served to destroy the essential elements of Alcibiades’ plan. The immense size of the force frightened the local cities more than Syracuse did. In the end, the Reginians refused the Athenians access to their city.<sup>74</sup>

The three generals met to consider an alternate course of action. Nicias, feeble, vacillating, and opposed to the expedition from the beginning, argued for conducting a show-of-force before Syracuse and then returning to Athens. Alcibiades, thinking such action disgraceful, suggested a modification to his original strategy. His new plan called for the use of his considerable talents to use diplomacy to garner logistical support from the Greek cities in Sicily and Italy. Lamachus, sensing the fleeting opportunity before them, sought a direct attack against Syracuse. Thucydides endorses Lamachus’ plan as the most appropriate and the one that had the greatest chance of success. In the end, Lamachus could not persuade either Nicias or Alcibiades and ultimately provided his reluctant support to Alcibiades.

The efforts to secure allies among the Sicilian and Italian Greeks proved fruitless; and while they were in progress, Alcibiades enemies had him recalled to Athens to stand trial for his life on trumped-up charges of sacrilege. With most of his political allies absent from Athens, he knew that a death sentence awaited him. Rather than obey the summons from the assembly, he managed to escape the ship sent to guarantee his return and fled to Sparta to seek asylum. Despite his absence, the Athenian assembly “passed a sentence of death by default upon him and those in his company.”<sup>75</sup> The departure of Alcibiades left Nicias and Lamachus to pursue operations along the lines of their own ideas.

However, the efforts by the Athenians to obtain allies, although not achieving the success envisioned by Alcibiades, caused the Syracusans to begin the work required to prepare

the defenses of their city. The presence of the expeditionary force at Rhegium was the decisive event, in their collective minds, which instigated the vigorous preparations.

The Athenian expedition sailed south along the Sicilian coast to Catana, which lay some thirty miles north of Syracuse. Soon after the Athenians established themselves at Catana, the Syracusans became emboldened by the fact that they had not been attacked. They grew contemptuous of the Athenians and "called upon their generals, as the multitude is apt to do in its moments of confidence, to lead them to Catana, since the enemy would not come to them."<sup>76</sup> Nicias, hearing of the Syracusans' desire to engage the expedition, made plans to allow the Syracusans to march on Catana. However, under cover of darkness, he intended to embark his force, sail for the Great Harbor of Syracuse, and occupy a position immediately east of Olympieum. Additionally, he obtained the services of a Catana native, one known to the Syracusans and held in high esteem, and sent him to the Syracusans armed with false knowledge on the careless watch maintained by the Athenians.

When all was ready for the surprise attack on Catana, the Syracusan army set out, and immediately its departure was signaled to Nicias. He embarked his army and using the cover afforded by darkness, slipped into the Great Harbor. Landing south of the Anapus river, he established his camp and built a palisade around it and his ships before the Syracusan army could return. When it did, they established their camp opposite Nicias'.

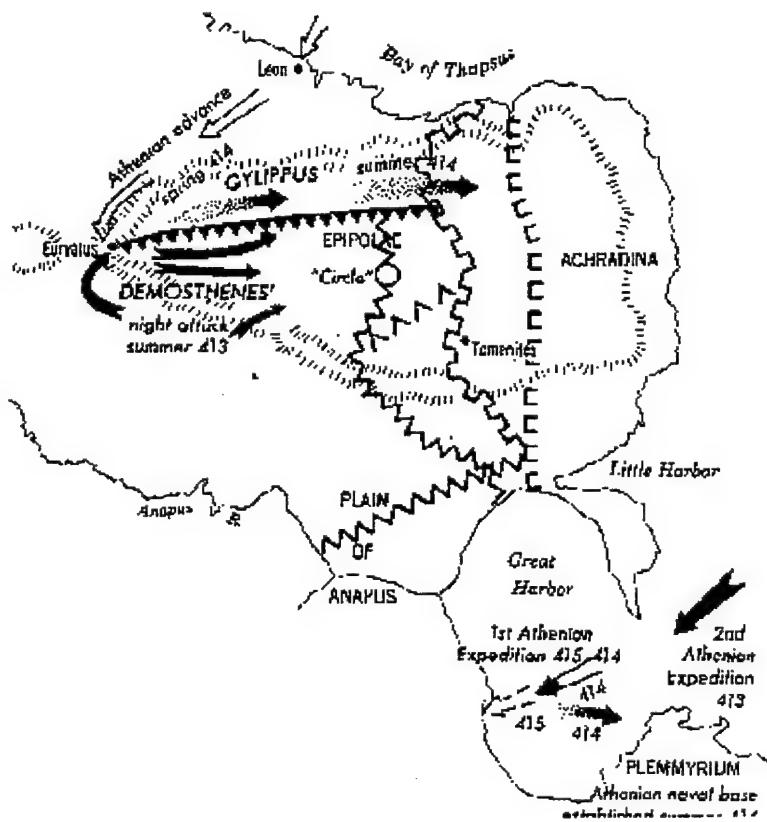
The next day both armies prepared for battle. The Syracusans drew up their heavy infantry in a sixteen-rank phalanx with 1,200 cavalry on its right flank. Nicias, still without cavalry and fearing the enemy's, formed half his army into an eight-deep phalanx in advance. Close to his camp in rear of this division he assembled the other half in a hollow square, with his camp followers inside it. This reserve was ordered to "look out and be ready to go to the support of the troops hardest pressed." Nicias' dispositions were clearly designed as an anti-cavalry formation.<sup>77</sup>

The battle began with a skirmish between archers and slingers, under cover of which the heavy infantry closed in on each other. The Syracusan left was driven in by Argive heavy infantry, followed by a penetration of the center by Athenians. The Syracusans were saved from annihilation by the introduction of their cavalry that slowed the pursuit of the Athenians. The battle proved to be a tactical victory for the Athenians and their allies. However, the Athenians failed to follow-up the victory and were content to return to camp.

Nicias, fearing his exposed position on the Plain of Anapus, returned to Catana where he established winter quarters. Upon his return, he sent a galley to Athens with a request for additional forces, specifically, cavalry. The Syracusans learned a valuable lesson from the

encounter, namely, the imprudence of sending ill-trained troops against trained soldiers. They spent the winter drilling and training their forces in expectation of renewed campaigning in the spring of 414 B.C. In addition, they sent envoys to Corinth and Sparta to seek assistance. Further, they worked to build a wall in Temenites to prevent the Athenians from building a wall west of the city designed to establish a siege line.

### THE SIEGE OF SYRACUSE, 415-413 B.C.



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Figure 3.

The Syracusan envoys arrived in the Peloponnesus and found an advocate in the person of Alcibiades. He divulged the Athenian plans to them, but more importantly, urged the Spartans to action against the expedition. "For yourselves I entreat you to believe," Alcibiades appeals to the Spartans, "that your most vital interests are now under consideration...by the

presence of a small force you will...destroy the power of Athens both in present and prospective."<sup>78</sup> Certainly, Athens overextension presented an opportunity for the Spartans, however, they did not yet want to break the peace. On Alcibiades suggestion, they agreed to send the Spartan general, Gylippus, to take command of the Syracusan army, and the Corinthians, then at war with Athens, promised reinforcements.

Gylippus was not provided with money or men, but was given the authority of Sparta and the influence of her name. The Corinthians and others equipped a squadron of galleys to act under him for the rescue of Sicily. As soon as the force was ready, he hurried to the coast of Italy, fearing that he was too late.

In May 414 B.C., Nicias and Lamachus having received nearly three-hundred horsemen from Athens and having recruited four-hundred from surrounding areas, were ready for a new season of campaigning. The Athenian force landed north of the city at Leon and drove south to seize Euryalus, which the Syracusans had failed to fortify. The Athenians advanced across Epipolae, defeating the Syracusans and driving them behind their walls. Promptly, the Athenians began the investment of the city, building a fort called the "Circle." From this they started construction of walls north and south. To prevent their city from being completely cut off, the Syracusans began a counterwall west of Temenites, which the Athenians quickly destroyed and in the process, wrecked pipes, which supplied the city with drinking water. A second Syracusan counterwall south, near the Great Harbor, met the same fate. However, in the process of the battles for the walls, Lamachus was killed, an irreparable loss to the Athenians, for it left Nicias in sole command.<sup>79</sup> Despite the loss of Lamachus, the investment of the city was almost complete, and the Athenian fleet sailed into the Great Harbor itself. Victory was in sight of the Athenians.

The Syracusans were in dire and desperate straits and so widespread was the feeling that they called an assembly to discuss the terms of surrender. The sight of a galley making all possible speed into the Great Harbor interrupted their deliberations. The speeding galley contained a Corinthian general bearing the promise of aid from the Peloponnesus fleet led by Gylippus. The news that a Spartan was coming to lead them strengthened the Syracusan resolve to resist.

Gylippus, meanwhile, was gathering an army from Sicilian cities, of which the regular forces he brought with him formed the nucleus.<sup>80</sup> Such was the influence of the name of Sparta and so vigorous were his activities, that he gathered a force of over 2,000 heavy infantry and various irregular forces. Nicias did not attempt to interfere with the activities of the Spartan either in his recruiting, or when he moved south, in his movements. In fact, he left Euryalus

unsecured so that Gylippus was free to use the route up to Epipolae and enter the city unhindered.

Joining forces with the Syracusans, Gylippus began construction of a third wall westward across Epipolae. When completed, it blocked the Athenians north of the Circle fort, thus preventing the complete investment of Syracuse. Nicias made no effort to block the counterwall, but instead, increasingly relied on the Athenian fleet to provide his logistical support. He established a naval base on the south shore of the Great Harbor at Plemmyrium. Summer was now over and the Athenians had lost the initiative.

The Athenian expedition to Sicily captured the collective attention of Greece. Every enemy of Athens saw the opportunity to administer a fatal blow to her. Large reinforcements from Corinth and other Greek cities arrived to assist the Syracusans. Nicias appealed for a decision from Athens as to the future of the expedition. It is clear from his appeal that he was dispirited and defeated. However, it was not in the nature of the Athenians to depart from an enterprise once undertaken.<sup>81</sup> The course adopted by the Athenians was to send a second expedition, despite the fact that enemies pressed her in Attica and open warfare had been renewed. The Athenians were buoyed by the belief that her navy still reined supreme on the seas and would allow her to ultimately prevail. The effect was to cause Athens to expend the last of her resources in the attempt to secure Syracuse and all of Sicily.

Demosthenes, one of Athens' most distinguished generals, was placed in command of the second expedition. He had led the Athenian forces in the capture of the Spartans at Sphacteria, the severest blow dealt to Sparta during the course of the war and the cause for the signing of the Peace of Nicias. If Demosthenes had been placed at the head of the Athenian expedition in 415 B.C., instead of leading the second expedition in 413 B.C., the fortunes of the Athenians would have certainly been different.

In July 413 B.C. to the great pleasure of the Athenians and the dismay of the Syracusans, Demosthenes arrived in Sicily. The appearance of the second expedition was critically timed, for Gylippus had opened a spring offensive by attacking the Athenians by sea and by land. He captured the naval base at Plemmyrium, while in a second battle he actually defeated the Athenian fleet, thus winning for the Syracusan cause a significant moral victory. With the gaining of the initiative on the sea as well as the land, Gylippus prepared to press his advantage by fresh attacks. However, the arrival of Demosthenes and his force completely changed the situation and restored the balance of combat power in favor of the Athenians. His force included seventy-three galleys and a total of about 15,000 armed men, including heavy infantry, archers and slingers. His entry into the Great Harbor dramatically changed the

situation, causing the Syracusans and their allies to take counsel of their fears. To the Syracusans, the arrival of the fleet suggested that the resources of Athens were limitless and that continued resistance was hopeless.

Since Nicias was a sick man, slowed by a kidney ailment, Demosthenes assumed control of the now combined forces.<sup>82</sup> Demosthenes, taking advantage of the enthusiasm his arrival generated, took action against the counterwall built across Epipolae. First, to clear the approach to the plateau, he drove the Syracusans out of the Anapus plain. Next, he employed siege engines and battering rams to assist in a full-scale attack against the wall. However, the Syracusans successfully repelled the assault. Finally, he decided on a night attack, his aim was to seize Eryalus and flank the counterwall.

By the light of a full moon, the first portion of the attack was successfully carried-out. Eryalus was surprised and the Athenians occupied the position. However, while the Athenians were busily engaged in destroying the wall, the Syracusans counterattacked and both lines were hopelessly intermixed. As often happens in night fighting, a part of the Athenian force fell back in confusion on the reserve forces moving forward to add weight to the Athenian attack. This was that critical moment on which the future of the empire turned. All now fell subject to the confusion and Demosthenes' attack failed with the attendant dire consequences.

The defeat was decisive; the Athenians afterward struggled to simply protect themselves from the vengeance of enraged enemies. Demosthenes decided that the only option open to the surviving Athenian forces was to raise the siege and withdraw to Attica.<sup>83</sup> Nicias agreed to the proposal, but argued for delay on the ground that he maintained contact with "a party in Syracuse who wished to betray the city to the Athenians, and kept sending messages and telling him not to raise the siege."<sup>84</sup>

The withdrawal of the expedition was delayed for nearly a month, but when the enemy received more reinforcements, a decision became imperative. Amid the greatest secrecy, the plans were developed and all was prepared for the withdrawal. However, when the expedition was on the point of withdrawing, the full moon was eclipsed (27 August, 413 B.C.).<sup>85</sup> The Athenians took the eclipse as a bad omen and refused to embark, urging a delay for a more auspicious time. Unfortunately, Nicias, "who was somewhat over-addicted to divination," agreed with them "until they had waited the thrice nine days prescribed by the soothsayers."<sup>86</sup>

The decision by the Athenians, being made known to Gylippus, he at once turned it to his advantage. Although he was inferior to the Athenians in numbers of ships, he attacked their naval base and destroyed the fleet. The surviving sailors and soldiers vainly sought refuge

inland. A retreat was attempted, but lack of water and incessant and unrelenting attacks by the Syracusan forces led to the surrender of the Athenians.

The 7,000 survivors of the nearly 50,000 soldiers and sailors that Athens had sent against Syracuse, found captivity in the Syracusan quarries. Thucydides writes, "no single suffering to be apprehended by men thrust into such a place spared them."<sup>87</sup> Against the will of Gylippus, Nicias and Demosthenes were butchered. "This," writes Thucydides, "was the greatest Hellenic achievement of any in this war, or, in my opinion in Hellenic history; at once most glorious to the victors, and most calamitous to the conquered. They were beaten at all points and all together; all that they suffered was great; they were destroyed, as the saying is, with a total destruction, their fleet, their army - everything was destroyed, and few out of many returned home."<sup>88</sup>

The danger from Athens to the independent city-states of the western Mediterranean was now and forever ended. Athens would continue to struggle with her enemies and her allies, who revolted against her with unparalleled gallantry. Several years were to pass before Athens surrendered. Although she would enjoy some fleeting successes, no one event would restore Athens to her former power and domination. The dominion of Western Europe would be left to Rome and Carthage to dispute two centuries later in conflicts bloodier and more terrible.<sup>89</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The Romans did not know, could not know, how deeply the greatness of their own posterity, and the fate of the Western World, were involved in the destruction of the Athenian expeditionary force in the harbor of Syracuse. Had the great expedition proven victorious, the energies of Athens and all of Greece, would have found fertile fields in the West - Italy, Sicily and beyond. Greece, instead of Rome, might have conquered North Africa, Gaul and Iberia. Greek, instead of Latin might have been today the principle element in the language. However, none of this was to be resident in the world's history.

Although the war would drag on for another ten years, the defeat of the Syracuse expedition was the end for the great empire. Her navy and treasury were spent by the mismanagement of her leaders in the pursuit of objectives not in her interest. Allies ended their tributary relationships, many moving to side with the hated Spartans. Her revered democracy fell prey to oligarchic rule and invited Spartan intervention in her internal affairs. However, most importantly, her animating spirit was broken.

Absolute as the disaster was, its cause can be attributed, in some measure, to faulty strategic concept and execution. The death of Pericles left a void that was never completely filled. The Athenian strategic leaders proved to be increasingly less certain. Athens lost the strategic direction provided by her "First Citizen," Pericles, and she overreached in a number of diverse and extended adventures, and missed opportunities for favorable peace settlements through foolish pride after successes.<sup>90</sup> In addition, inept tactical execution appears as a likely candidate for the Athenian defeat. However, the common thread of leadership runs through her defeat.

The Athenian adventure in Sicily is the most notable among many instances of the miscalculations that led to her defeat. She possessed the power to negotiate from strength and shape the environment to her advantage, but chose a course of imperialist conquest that in the end led to the total destruction of her military forces.

Athens failed to comprehend the responsibilities of governing an empire. Had she used her exceptional power to extend the benefits of citizenship to her empire, she would have enjoyed a much greater degree of security, generally, and most likely have brought many of Sparta's allies into her camp as well. Instead, she became less of a leader of an alliance and more of a tyrant, shrill of voice and indifferent to the interests of her allies. In short, Athens suffered from a lack of leadership and the cost was her empire.

WORD COUNT= 11,149



## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Donald Kagan, "Athenian Strategy in the Peloponnesian War," in The Making of Strategy, ed. Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox and Alvin Bernstein (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Press, 1994) pg 25.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>4</sup> Thucydides, 1.1.2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., xvii.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., xviii.

<sup>7</sup> Knox, Bernard M.W. "Fifth Century Athens: The Intellectual Background of Thucydides," Naval War College Review, (November 1973): 4.

<sup>8</sup> Kagan, "Athenian Strategy in the Peloponnesian War," 28.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>12</sup> Knox, Bernard M.W. "Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War: Politics and Power," Naval War College Review, (October 1981): 18.

<sup>13</sup> Kagan, "Athenian Strategy in the Peloponnesian War," 29.

<sup>14</sup> Kagan, Donald, The Outbreak of the Peloponnesian War (London: Cornell University Press, 1969), 2. Hereafter referred to as Outbreak.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>17</sup> Thucydides, 1.42.2.

<sup>18</sup> Kagan, "Athenian Strategy in the Peloponnesian War," 29.

<sup>19</sup> Thucydides, 2.34.3.

<sup>20</sup> Kagan, "Athenian Strategy in the Peloponnesian War," 29.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>22</sup> Kagan, "Athenian Strategy in the Peloponnesian War," 30.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>24</sup> Kagan, Outbreak, 124.

<sup>25</sup> Kagan, "Athenian Strategy in the Peloponnesian War," 30.

<sup>26</sup> Thucydides, 1.122.2.

<sup>27</sup> Kagan, "Athenian Strategy in the Peloponnesian War," 31.

<sup>28</sup> Cook, "On Being a Sole Remaining Superpower: Lessons from History" Unpublished, Cited with permission of Dr. Cook, 11.

<sup>29</sup> Kagan, "Athenian Strategy in the Peloponnesian War," 33.

<sup>30</sup> Fuller, J.F.C., A Military History of the Western World, 57.

<sup>31</sup> Thucydides. 2.13.3. Speech of Pericles to the Athenian assembly detailing his strategy. Refer to Thucydides for the full text.

<sup>32</sup> Kagan, "Athenian Strategy in the Peloponnesian War," 30.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>34</sup> Thucydides. 2.13.6-7.

<sup>35</sup> Kagan, "Athenian Strategy in the Peloponnesian War," 34.

<sup>36</sup> Fuller, 57.

<sup>37</sup> Kagan, Donald, The Archidamian War, (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1974), 102.

<sup>38</sup> Fuller, 58.

<sup>39</sup> Kagan, "Athenian Strategy in the Peloponnesian War," 41.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>42</sup> Durant, Will, The Life of Greece, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1939), 440.

<sup>43</sup> Mitchell and Creasy, 25.

<sup>44</sup> Thucydides. 2.65.7.

<sup>45</sup> Durant, 442.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 443.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 443.

<sup>48</sup> Kagan, "Athenian Strategy in the Peloponnesian War," 48.

<sup>49</sup> Kagan, The Peace of Nicias and The Sicilian Expedition, (Ithaca, New York and London: Cornell University Press, 1981), 355.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 356.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 356.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 356.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 357.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>55</sup> Cook, 18-19.

<sup>56</sup> Fuller, 26.

<sup>57</sup> Kagan, "Athenian Strategy in the Peloponnesian War," 49.

<sup>58</sup> Ellis, Walter M., Alcibiades, (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), xiv.

<sup>59</sup> Kagan, "Athenian Strategy in the Peloponnesian War," 49.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>61</sup> Cook, 19.

<sup>62</sup> Thucydides, 6.10.1.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 6.11.1.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 6.11.4.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 6.15.2.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 6.18.3,4.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 6.21.1.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 6.23.2.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 6.24.3.

<sup>70</sup> Kagan, "Athenian Strategy in the Peloponnesian War," 50.

<sup>71</sup> Mitchell and Creasy, 28.

<sup>72</sup> Thucydides, 6.33.4-5. The text of Hermocrates speech to the assembled Syracusans.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 6.34.6.

<sup>74</sup> Kagan, "Athenian Strategy in the Peloponnesian War," 51.

<sup>75</sup> Thucydides, 6.62.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 6.64.

<sup>77</sup> Fuller, 64.

<sup>78</sup> Thucydides, 6.92.5.

<sup>79</sup> Mitchell and Creasy, 30.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>82</sup> Fuller, 70.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>84</sup> Thucydides, 7.49.2.

<sup>85</sup> Fuller, 71.

<sup>86</sup> Thucydides, 7.50.4.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 7.87.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 7.87.3.

<sup>89</sup> Mitchell and Creasy, 36-37.

<sup>90</sup> Cook, 8.

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